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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 9237
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 3123
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2199
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3031
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 6681
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4565
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000976

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: POPULATION MOVEMENTS IN CONFLICT AREAS
WORRY OBSERVERS, MYSTERIOUS LEAFLET TARGETS MUSLIMS

REF: COLOMBO 696

Classified By: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. 1.4(b,d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The unsteady security environment since April 2006, including ethnic communal incidents and military action, has led to displacement among Sinhalese, Muslim, and Tamil communities in the North and East of Sri Lanka. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) currently estimates some 30,000 people have fled Trincomalee district to other areas of the North and East; of those, an estimated 1,700 have fled to Tamil Nadu, India. In Trincomalee, a suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) front distributed a threatening leaflet demanding Muslims leave the area for their own safety. In order to stabilize communities and avoid an escalating internally displaced persons (IDP) problem mirroring the unsolved displacement of the 1980s and 1990s, confidence between the public and authorities must be rebuilt and citizens resettled along the lines of what was discussed at the May 30 Co-Chairs' meeting in Tokyo. End summary.

Background

¶2. (U) UNHCR, which has worked on the resettlement issue in Sri Lanka since the mid-1980s, estimates up to 1 million Sri Lankans were displaced during the two and a half decades of armed ethnic conflict due to: forceful eviction by the LTTE, Sri Lanka Military High Security Zones (HSZ), loss of livelihood, and human rights violations by the military, police, and militant Tamil groups. Some 200,000 emigrated from Sri Lanka. When the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE signed the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) in February 2002, approximately 730,000 individuals remained displaced island-wide by conflict. By November 2004, one month prior to the tsunami, UNHCR counted 352,582 conflict IDPs. The vast majority of these were displaced from the North and

East, and remain concentrated in Trincomalee, Jaffna, Puttalam, Vavuniya, Mannar, and Anuradhapura.

IDP Estimates in Flux

13. (C) Numbers of IDPs since the April 2006 rise in violence were initially overestimated and then promptly exaggerated by the Tamil and international press. An April 27 report from the Government Agent (GA) of Trincomalee district listed 40,000 IDPs from Trincomalee district, a number that was quickly reduced to 12,000 to 15,000 by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Colombo. According to UNHCR, however, the number of internally displaced persons has risen towards the GA's initial estimate due to communal incidents and military action.

14. (C) A June 2 draft document given to DCM by UNHCR estimated the number of IDPs from the current eruption of violence at 37,878 individuals nation-wide, or 10, 489 families. UNHCR stated that between April 7 and May 29, 32,401 people, fled Trincomalee to Tiger-controlled Mullaitivu and Kilinochchi, parts of Batticaloa, and Mannar on the west coast, where approximately 1,700 have continued on by boat to India. Smaller numbers, approximately 5,000, have fled other predominantly Tamil areas of Batticaloa, Jaffna, Mannar and Vavuniya. According to the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies and various press reports, since mid-April, LTTE fronts had been asking Tamil citizens to vacate government-controlled areas in the North and East to Tiger-controlled territory by May 30.

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15. (C) In a June 5 news article by Indian Sri Lanka analyst M.R. Narayan Swamy, S.C. Chandrasekaran, a welfare worker for Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu opined, "The people who are coming feel the Sri Lankan Government is not going to protect them from Sinhalese mobs: Relief centers need to come up in Mannar where refugees can live without being disturbed by the Security Forces or the LTTE. Then people won't come to India."

Oppressed by the Oppressed - Muslims Cry Tiger

16. (C) On May 29, a group calling itself the Tamil Eelam Motherland Liberation Army, a suspected LTTE front, distributed a Tamil-language flyer calling for Muslims in the Trincomalee-district town of Muttur (under partial LTTE-control) to evacuate the area before June 2. An English translation given to poloff by the UNDP accuses Muslims of being in cahoots with government paramilitaries, a favorite topic of the LTTE's avoidance of reentering peace talks. This raised memories of Tiger atrocities in 1990 when the 75,000 Muslims of Jaffna, Vavuniya and Kilinochchi were given 48 hours to leave by the LTTE.

17. (C) The Sri Lanka Army immediately ordered civil organizations to cease redistributing the pamphlet and asked civilians to remain in the area under the military's protection. By the supposed three-day deadline of June 2, no Muslims had left the area, according to Ms. Vasantha Mathiaparanam of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) in Trincomalee. A representative from the Dutch Zuis Oost Azie (ZOA) office in Muttur told Pol FSN on May 31 that following the distribution of the leaflet, Muslim families remained, though some Tamils continued to leave Muttur.

18. (C) Known LTTE sympathizers dismissed the leaflet report. Virakesari editor Thevaraj told poloff Muslims had distributed the pamphlet themselves to gain the sympathy of the government and the international community, and Tamil media largely ignored the story. Assumedly more balanced,

government-appointed HRC Coordinator Mathiaparanam similarly questioned the leaflet's authenticity, telling poloff that in her personal opinion "another group" was trying to create a rift between the LTTE and civilians.

¶9. (C) Some Muslim political organizations in Colombo, however, took the reports quite seriously. In a May 30 letter addressed to the Ambassador, N.M. Ameen, president of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, an umbrella group of over 75 national organizations, asked the Co-Chairs to "call upon the LTTE to refrain from any action that would jeopardize the security of innocent Muslims," noting that the LTTE has targeted Muslims often throughout its 25 year liberation struggle, including trying to label Sri Lankan Muslims as extremists. On June 2, Disaster Relief Services Minister and All Ceylon Muslim Congress leader Y.L.S. Hameed, however, told poloff he knew little about the leaflet but anticipated a "third party" of wishing to stir up tension between Muslims and Tamils.

Put Them in a Bus and Send Them Home

¶10. (C) In a June 2 call on the DCM, Axel Bishop of UNHCR said the GSL had urged UNHCR to take emergency action to resettle recent IDPs. The GSL's conception of the problem, however, was limited, suggesting that UNDP forcibly bus civilians from Mannar back to the areas in Trincomalee they had fled before they could continue on to India. Instead, UNHCR proposed a series of confidence building measures awaiting approval for implementation from the GSL. DCM told Bishop that the UNHCR proposal was very similar to confidence

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building measures being considered by the USG and also discussed by the Co-Chairs at their May 30 meeting.

Comment

¶11. (C) Continually the true victims of the island's ethnic violence, civilians in the unstable North and East are fleeing to areas they consider safer, including Tiger controlled territory, as well as Mannar on the west coast, the gateway to Indian Tamil Nadu. In partially Tiger-controlled Muttur, home of over 16,000 civilians, Muslim citizens have been forced to decide to play a potentially disastrous political game of go or stay. The number of new IDPs has risen above 30,000 since April 2006, a potential crisis that UNHCR and others are working hard to avoid. With IDP populations remaining in camps in the North and East from displacements two decades ago, the Government of Sri Lanka cannot linger long in allowing UNHCR to implement measures to return citizens to secure homes. End Comment.

LUNSTEAD